

Liszt As a Teacher, by Amy Fay

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By Amy Fay

While Liszt has been immensely written about as pianist and composer, sufficient stress has not been laid upon what the world owes him as a teacher of pianoforte-playing. During his life-time Liszt despised the name of "piano-teacher," and never suffered himself to be regarded as such. "I am no *Professeur du Piano*" he scornfully remarked one day in the class at Weimar, and if anyone approached him as a "teacher" he instantly put the unfortunate offender outside of his door.

I was once a witness of his haughty treatment of a Leipzig pupil of the fair sex, who came to him one day and asked him "to give her a few lessons." He instantly drew himself up and replied in the most cutting tone:

"I do not give lessons on the piano; and," he added, with a bow, in which grace and sarcasm were combined, "you really don't need me as a teacher." There was a dead silence for a minute, and then the poor girl, not knowing what to do or say, backed herself out of the room. Liszt, turning to the class, said:

"That is the way people fly in my face, by dozens! They seem to think I am there only to give them lessons on the piano. I have to get rid of them, for I am no *Professor of the Piano*. This girl did not play badly, either," concluded he, half ashamed of himself for his treatment of her.

For my part, I was awfully sorry for the girl, and I was tempted to run after her and bring her back, and intercede with Liszt to take her; but I was a new-comer myself, and did not quite dare to brave the lion in his den. Later, I would have done it, for the girl was really very talented, and it was a mere want of tact on her part in her manner of approaching Liszt which precipitated her defeat. She brought him Chopin's F-minor concerto, and played the middle movement of it, Liszt standing up and thundering out the orchestral accompaniment, *tremolo*, in the bass of the piano. I wondered it did not put the girl out, but she persisted bravely to the end, and did not break down, as I expected she would.

She came at an inopportune moment, for there were only five of us in the room, and we were having a most entertaining time with Liszt, that lovely June afternoon, and he did not feel disposed to be interrupted by a stranger. In spite of himself, he could not help doing justice to her talent, saying: "She did not play at all badly." This, however, the poor girl never knew. She probably wept briny tears of disappointment when she returned to her hotel.

While Liszt resented being called a "piano-teacher," he nevertheless was one, in the higher sense of the term. It was the difference between the scientific college professor of genius and the ordinary schoolteacher which distinguished him from the rank and file of musical instructors.

Nobody could be more appreciative of talent than Liszt was, even of talent which was not of the first order, and I was often amazed to see the trouble he would give himself with some industrious young girl who had worked hard over big compositions like Schumann's "Carnival," or Chopin's sonatas. At one of the musical gatherings at the *Fräuleins' Stahr* (music-teachers in Weimar, to whose simple home Liszt liked to come) I have heard him accompany on a second piano Chopin's E-minor concerto, which was technically well played, by a girl of nineteen from the Stuttgart Conservatory.

It was a contrast to see this young girl, with her rosy cheeks, big brown eyes, and healthy, every-day sort of talent, at one piano, and Liszt, the colossal artist, at the other.

He was then sixty-three years old, but the fire of youth burned in him still. Like his

successor, Paderewski, Liszt sat erect, and never bent his proud head over the "stupid keys," as he called them, even deprecating his pupils' doing so. He was very picturesque, with his lofty and ideal forehead thrown back, and his magnificent iron-gray hair falling in thick masses upon his neck. The most divine expression came over his face when he began to play the opening measures of the accompaniment, and I shall never forget the concentration and intensity he put into them if I live to be a hundred! The nobility and absolute "selflessness" of Liszt's playing had to be heard to be understood. There was something about his tone that made you weep, it was so apart from earth and so ethereal!

Touch is certainly a wonderful and subtle thing, and reveals the whole personality of the musician in a most mysterious way. Mr. B. J. Lang, some years ago, in his article on "Touch," which was so much discussed in the *New York Musical Courier*, and so entirely misunderstood, was right when he said that each person's touch upon the piano has something peculiar which distinguishes it from that of any other, and makes it his own. It is like the leaves of a tree, no two of which are exactly alike.

When Liszt played he seemed to be devoured by an inner flame, and he projected himself into music like a comet into space. He simply threw himself headlong into it, and gave all there was in him. The only pianist I have ever heard who resembles Liszt in this intensity of style is Fanny Bloomfield-Zeisler, who has the same appearance of expending her talent unreservedly and of pouring it out upon the public with the utmost prodigality. She, too, gives all there is in her, and works terrifically when she plays.

I am sometimes questioned as to Liszt's "method." He had none that I am aware of, although he doubtless served his time when he was a pupil of Czerny, who must have been one of the best teachers who ever lived. Probably it was to the faithful practice of Czerny's etudes (from which he, in vain, prayed his father to be delivered) in his youth that Liszt owed those fine-spun fingers of his, for his finger-technique was something marvelous, and made everybody else's seem coarse and heavy in comparison. I first woke up to the realization of a light wrist when I heard Liszt play his "Valse Impromptu," and learned the waltz, to try to imitate it. One learned of him by ear. You heard him do something and you wanted to do it, too. Of course, you couldn't, but it developed you a good deal to try.

Under the inspiration of Liszt's playing everybody worked "tooth and nail" to achieve the impossible. A smile of approbation from him was all we cared for. This is how it is that he turned out such a grand school of piano-playing. He was not afraid, and his pupils are like him. They are not afraid, either, and it is they who have revealed Liszt's beautiful compositions and brilliant concert-style to the world. It is the direct inheritance of his teaching and example, and even his least eminent pupils have caught something of Liszt's largeness of horizon.